

Weedon's World

Mike Weedon's birding adventures in his garden, his patch and beyond...



THERE is nothing I like more than getting up early on a freezing, dark, drizzly, miserable November day and trudging out to the muddy, mucky brownfield site I call my local patch, to search through Lapwings and Meadow Pipits for something remotely interesting.

What utter poppycock!

Give me a chance to visit some exotic locale, grab some winter sun and see some of the great birding spectacles of the world and I will virtually bite your hand off.

So, it was with more than a tad of relish in mid-November that I literally squeezed my overheated, sweating self into a small propeller plane (so small that two passengers had to be kicked off because of weight restrictions) and headed south from coastal Georgetown, Guyana.

Guyana is an incredible country in north-eastern South America, not far north of the Equator, which, though only a little smaller than the UK, has a population of less than 900,000 people. Most remarkable, though, is that more than 80% of the country is covered in more-or-less pristine rainforest.

Our short flight took us over the sugar plantations flanking the Demerara River (the clue is in the name) and very soon over that immense, seemingly unbroken canopy.

As we headed towards the south and west, the land started to rise up, hinting at the steep-sided 'tepui' country of Conan-Doyle's *Lost World*. Our destination was nearing – one of the great spectacles of the region, and one requiring a little elevation – the mighty waterfall of Kaieteur.

The Potaro River flows elegantly and gracefully through seemingly flat forest, then the plane banked round to reveal a beautiful, wooded steep gorge with an altogether lower river cutting through. Linking the two is the 741ft drop of the most beautiful waterfall. And what makes it so pleasing on the senses is the fact that it is just there in the forest, by the gorge – no garish railings, habitation, tourist stalls, no safety fence, just a forest, a gorge, a cliff, a waterfall.

There is a dirt landing strip nearby and soon we were leaving



The Kaieteur waterfall



The Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock

the plane and heading through the forest towards the sound of the falls. The land there is curious – harsh rock, baked like tarmac, a thin sand soil and weird vegetation. There are vast bromeliads growing from the ground, most providing a little pool home to a tiny golden frog.

We were there in the middle of the day and the peace and beauty of the place were left undisturbed by any birds. There simply were none. Well, that is not quite true – we saw one small bird that none of us could name and one other bird which I have dreamed about since I was minuscule.

Here, within metres of one of the viewpoints of the spectacular falls, was the lekking ground of the Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock. We snuck as quietly as possible to the little, slightly-clear area through the thick forest where the birds sometimes sit out the day.

And there it was – the size of a small, compact crow, glowing luminous orange-red among the green gloom, the mythical male cock-of-the rock. I was in ecstasy, until I moved an inch, cracked a twig and the bird flew off.

I was all set to throw myself off the falls in embarrassment, but thankfully our guide located another bird and I could attempt to re-establish some dignity.

In addition to its bizarre, stiff semicircle of a crest, the bird is decorated with absurd filigree and lace frills in bright orange. Everything about it is curious, including its habit of flipping in an instant from facing one way on the branch to the other, spinning effortlessly on the spot.

Rarely have I felt such a rush of excitement from watching a bird. But this majestic, internally lit, mysterious ball of orange, one of the great birds of the world, set in fabulous forest against the magnificent falls, had me walking on air for hours.

I am very lucky to have visited Guyana and experienced some of the best sights in the world. Somehow, it beats fighting the murk on another dull day in the Fens... [E]

Read more about Mike's trip to Guyana in next month's Bird Watching

For more information, see: www.guyana-tourism.com & www.guyanabirds.com